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Services for Individuals Affected by Sexual Assault Offered at No Cost

## Support Guide for Parents

### You, your child & family after sexual assault

It's both a heartbreaking and challenging experience for parents to watch a beloved daughter or son struggle to cope with sexual abuse or sexual assault.

Parents of children and teens who have been sexually assaulted face extremely difficult circumstances. You may feel unsure about the best way to respond. You may feel powerless, guilty, vengeful, angry, resentful, betrayal -- or any combination of these reactions. You may be frustrated with your inability to take away your child's pain, and confused about changes in their behaviour. Your child's recovery process can dominate your time and consume your own physical energies and emotional resources.

The immediate trauma of the event will subside over time, but longer-term psychological consequences can emerge whether your child is very young, a teenager or has grown to adulthood. On the other hand, there are some children who either experience little trauma or are able to move through the healing process relatively quickly.

The impact on your child depends on the following factors:

- Most importantly, their relationship with the offender
- The age(s) when they were abused
- The length of time and frequency of the abusive incidents
- The type of sexual behaviours they were exposed to or experienced
- The degree of violence or threat of violence they experienced with the abuse

Experiences that reduce trauma and help children heal include:

- Being believed when they tell
- Being recognized for their bravery and strength
- Hearing clear messages that the responsibility belongs to the offender
- Minimal disruption in the child's life after disclosure
- Sensitivity from those around them to conflicted feelings the child may have about the abuse and the offender
- Impact and healing are also dependent on individual personality factors

Depending on the circumstances and interpersonal dynamics, families can come together or be pulled apart by their reactions to sexual violence. At any age, brothers and sisters can be supportive of their abused sibling or feel

resentful about the added attention they receive. If the offender was a trusted relative, feelings of disbelief or denial can emerge to cause internal family conflict.

Relatives, friends and others who care about your child will naturally have strong feelings about the incident, and it's important for them to deal with these thoughts and emotions. Suppressing your own emotions may make you less capable of helping the child you love.

Children who have been sexually abused are often very sensitive to the well-being of others. To avoid the possibility of your child taking on responsibility for how other people feel, and to facilitate healing for your entire family, you may want to consider seeking help for you and your family in dealing with this issue.

## How to support your child following a disclosure of sexual assault

**Tell your child you believe them.** One of your child's biggest fears may be that their parent(s) won't believe their story. Through calm, accepting and encouraging responses, you'll demonstrate that you're prepared to take what your child tells you as the truth. Minimizing, denying or mistrusting their experience is damaging to them. It also may cause them to retreat into silence or even to recant their story. They will be much less likely to deal positively with the trauma if they experience disbelief from you.

**Tell your child that this was not their fault.** Talk to your daughter or son without judgment or analyzing their experience. Reassure them that whatever they may have done at the time, it was the right choice. By always putting TOTAL responsibility on the offender, you help your child to reduce feelings of guilt, denial and self-blame. SEXUAL ABUSE AND ASSAULT ARE NEVER, EVER THE SURVIVOR'S FAULT.

**Ask before you touch.** One of the most important teachings parents can give children is the message that their body is their own. They need to know that they don't have to give or receive touch with anyone they don't want to, including you. In some cases, children may not have a clear sense of their own boundaries after sexual abuse. These children need lots of encouragement to pay attention to their feelings about being touched, to say no when they don't want it and to ask when they do. When a child is sexually abused or assaulted, or after they tell about the abuse, you may see changes in their emotional state or behaviours. It's important to recognize that these changes usually have nothing to do with you personally. They're often completely normal human responses to an experience that may have caused considerable emotional -- and sometimes physical -- trauma. Your child may need help to sort through their emotions at this time.

Your daughter or son's experience may have happened very recently, or she/he may have chosen to share this after suffering in silence for a long time. Either way, what matters is that your child needs your parental love, strength and support as never before.

Whether you're parenting with a partner or individually, these suggestions may be of help to you:

Other children may feel hypersensitive to touch after sexual abuse. These children also need messages about the importance of boundaries, but over time may need help to feel safe with loving touch. It's up to your child to decide whether hugging or holding will be comforting or stressful, so respond according to their words and body language. Try your best not to take their reactions personally.

**Be a rock.** Your daughter or son needs someone solid and dependable to hang onto, both emotionally and physically. Provide plenty of reassurance that your feelings of love haven't changed. Tell your child that you believe in their ability to recover fully from the experience. Try to instill a sense of hope. If this is hard for you to do, then seek help for yourself and ensure your child has someone in their life they can talk to about this.

**Listen well.** Encourage your child to express the confusing spectrum of emotions she or he is experiencing, with freedom to determine when and how she can do this. Whenever your child opens up to you, just listen. Don't interrupt

or inject your own feelings, and don't suggest what they should be feeling. Expect both positive and negative emotions. If the perpetrator was someone your child knows well or they have provided affection or nurturing to them in the past (such as a family member, close friend, or coach/mentor), they may have mixed feelings about what's happened.

**Only share your own feelings when it's appropriate to do so.** It may be OK to share your own feelings of grief, sadness or even anger with your child when it's clear to the child that the abuse was wrong. In some cases children are confused about their experience, and they may care deeply for the person who has abused them. It's most important that your response be respectful of the child's feelings and where they are in their healing.

Messages to the child that what happened to them was wrong and that the person who did it shouldn't have are important. Messages that you'll do everything you can to protect from this ever happening again are important too, but if you share too much of your own feelings, your child may start feeling guilty about causing you pain, or choose to protect you by holding back their own emotions. If this starts to happen, you can seek support for yourself (AASAS member agencies can help you).

**Validate the impacts of their experience.** Sexual abuse is very hard for anyone to talk about, and even more so for a child. They may have been frightened or threatened into silence, or they may not have realized it was wrong, and they may have originally experienced it as positive affection.

It's important to realize that whatever their age was at that time, your child coped with their experience in the best way they could. As they move forward in their development, they may attempt to link that event with the effects they're coping with today, or in the future. Nobody else can measure exactly how the assault has affected them; your child will need to work this out on their own.

**Encourage your child to continue doing things they like, and encourage them to spend time with others.** Even if your child is young, it's important for them to regain age-appropriate feelings of competence and control in their life. You need to resist the powerful urge to overprotect your daughter or son, and to offer positive support for things they choose to do.

**Accept that you won't be able to "fix" it.** No matter how much you care and how hard you try, you can't remove the impact of the abuse. Some emotional suffering may be inevitable. Sometimes, the hardest -- but best -- thing to do may be to do nothing at all. Your most valuable support may simply be a loving, understanding and eternally patient mom or dad that your child knows will always be there when needed.

It's also really important to know that children are resilient, that many children come through sexual assault or abuse extremely well. This often has to do with the positive and loving support they get from family and others, and it also has to do with the incredible inner strength that children possess. Try to stay positive, and believe that your child can heal from their experience.

**Know your own limits.** You naturally want to comfort, heal and protect your child in the aftermath of a traumatic experience, but your own physical and emotional energy isn't limitless. If you try to give too much of yourself throughout the recovery process, you may find yourself resenting or withdrawing just when your child needs you most. No one person -- not even a parent -- can give a child all the support they need, so you should help your child to spend "quality time" with other people who care about them and can support their recovery.

It's important that you get to talk about how you are feeling as well. Choose a trusted person who can help you "download" your own stress and express your own feelings about what's happened. This could be a friend, support group or a professional counsellor (an [AASAS member agency](#) can provide you with information, support and counselling).

**Take care of yourself, too.** Try not to completely immerse yourself in supporting or worrying about your child. No matter how much you love and care about your family, you also need to consciously set aside time for your own

needs. Find diversions that will lighten your emotional load and recharge your ability to give support. Get engrossed in your favourite sport or hobby, go for a walk, see a movie, read a book. If you have a spouse, partner or other children, spend time with them. Eventually, plan "date nights" or family outings like you would have done before. It's OK to have fun, and to demonstrate to your child that there is life beyond what has happened. This is positive role modeling for them in their recovery and growth, and it's healthy for you too.

**Be patient, stay positive.** Have faith that the immediate crisis will pass. Your child's healing and recovery can't be rushed and will proceed at it's own pace. Cherish your child, recognize the small victories and celebrate them all.